Users Seek Higher Levels of Support for System Software Products

Businesses today depend more than ever for their success on complex software. Users therefore are demanding increasing levels of reliability from their system software products.

A logical response to this development is for vendors to demonstrate confidence in their software products by formulating more comprehensive support offerings.

This bulletin examines the support arrangements for *midrange systems software products* offered by two major vendors:

- Digital's DECsystem Support Service (DSS)

- Hewlett-Packard's System Support Options.

By comparing support features, this bulletin identifies some of the main areas of potential support differentiation and, by reference to user preference findings from a recent survey, suggests likely future strategies for vendors.

DECsystem Support Services (DSS)

DSS is a premium-level service covering equipment, software and operating systems during the warranty period.

The service features, shown in Exhibit 1, include an updates licence, telephone support and electronic access to a database of known problems, patches and solutions. DSS also includes a non-conformance warranty and offers initial load and test of additionally purchased products during system installation.

Various extended cover options are available, such as 18 hour telephone and engineer support. Further individual services can also be purchased, including Media and Documentation Distribution Service (MDDS), CD Distribution Service (CDDS) and a Software Update Installation Service (SUIS).

Hewlett-Packard System Support Options

Hewlett-Packard's System Support Options cover equipment, software and operating systems during the warranty period.

The service features, shown in Exhibit 1, include an updates licence, telephone support and electronic access to a database of product and software status information.

Customers choosing a System Support Option with telephone support can additionally purchase a Personalised Support Service, which is geared to the number of system users. This further option includes the services of an assigned Support Account Manager who will co-ordinate on-site services and conduct scheduled operational reviews; it also offers an installation service and a system release planning seminar.

Comprehensiveness and Flexibility are the Keys

Digital and Hewlett-Packard offer similar basic support features, though individual terms and conditions vary considerably. A comparison of chargeable extra features suggests that there are four key areas of differentiation:

- Extending availability of telephone and engineer support

- Providing different delivery mechanisms for software updates and documentation, including media options (tape, CD)

- Offering an update installation service

- Offering personalised services, such as the assignment of an account manager to co-ordinate customer operations.

Of these, improved update delivery and managed installation are key differentiators, as suggested by the findings of a recent INPUT survey. *Open services* users are clearly signalling the need for a more coherent approach to systems software updates.

The same survey revealed how highly users value access to experts. This would indicate that personalised services and the extension of support availability will also find favour with users.

The comparison of software support indicates that vendors are offering basic cover, plus a variety of graded extensions to the basic agreement. Recent surveys of both equipment maintenance and systems software support services indicate that comprehensiveness and flexibility are key user requirements.

However, there are dangers. The benefits of a comprehensive and flexible service portfolio include improved user choice, but vendors must not risk user confusion by offering overly complex service options.

Clearly, the balance vendors must strike is to develop flexible, yet easily configurable service options, while building in sufficient differentiating factors to create competitive edge.

Exhibit 1

Systems Software Support Offerings Compared

Support Feature	Digital	Hewlett-Packard
Period of warranty	1 year	1 year
Telephone Problem Logging	Call Customer Support Centre: 7x24x365	Call UK Response Centre: 7x24x365
Engineer Cover	09.00 to 17.00, working days	09.00 to 17.00, working days
Response time	Call back within 1 hour	Call back in no more than 2 hours
Electronic Problem Support	•Access to database of: -Known problems -Patches -Solutions •Optional electronic call submittal	•Access to database of: -New product information -Software status bulletins -Engineering and application notes -Information browse •Optional electronic call submittal
Licence	To use new versions and maintained releases	To use new versions and maintained releases
Initial Software Load	Yes, plus any other DEC systems software delivered at the same time	Operating system software plus HP subsystems installed to default configuration
Non-Conformance Warranty	Yes, product must conform to software product description	No
Documentation and tapes	Initial set provided	Initial set provided
Chargeable extras	1.Extended telephone and engineer support to 18 hours a day	1.Can extend telephone support in line with an out of hours equipment contract
	2.Physical provision of software updates and documentation (MDDS and CDDS)	2.Personalised system support contract including: –System release planning seminar –Review of operating procedures
	3.Software Update Installation Service (SUIS)	3.Installation of software updates (part of personalised support, see 2)

Source: INPUT

Reshaping Software Support for Business-Critical Systems

Today's systems software products are business-critical, and users are demanding the highest levels of product reliability and resilience. This, in turn, places great emphasis on underlying support mechanisms, which must be highly responsive, comprehensive, yet flexible.

As users demand more from their systems software products, so they will use service as a yardstick by which to judge potential suppliers.

Vendors must respond by reshaping their service offerings, and the signs are that vendors will use more comprehensive strategies for software product support as a competitive weapon in the same way that it is being used for basic equipment maintenance.